



Above: *Blue Jug* by Billie Culy.

Interview by Ashleigh
Taupaki (Ngāti Hako,
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Meet The Culyys

Talent, creativity, and style: are they genetically inherited or a by-product of one's surroundings?

Ashleigh Taupaki (Ngāti Hako, Hauraki) talks to Brian, Harry, and Billie Culy — an extended family of successful photographers — about their background, relationships with one another, and how these have affected their individual artistic practices.

Ashleigh: Brian, you settled in Hawke's Bay in 2005, and have since become part of a close-knit art community in the area. Can you tell me about your decision to move there as a family and the links that tie each of you back to this place? Are there benefits to being away from the hustle and bustle of bigger cities and how has the landscape influenced your art practices?

Brian: After five years in the Wairarapa, I felt trapped, I needed an adventure so we moved to Kerikeri. The Far North was like the real New Zealand and we loved it there. Our kids were happy but, after another five years, we felt isolated. We moved again, this time to Hawke's Bay where [my wife] Leanne had family connections and was familiar with its environment, but it was central to everywhere.

Hawke's Bay was an incredibly welcoming community and I have been inspired living here. It's dry, hot and barren and there's not a lot of bush, a contrast to the Far North. It has influenced my environmental photography and I am interested in the incongruous nature of life here.

Ashleigh: Billie, your mother is also an artist with her own painting practice. What was your childhood like growing up as siblings in an artistic family? Have you learnt anything from your parents that's become integral to the way you work, or can you recall any formative art-related experiences?

Billie: I think I had a very unique childhood being surrounded by creativity wherever I looked. I was so fortunate because I was able to witness my parents' incredible talents and see them thriving and making it a viable career and life for us. There was always something going on at the house that my sister (Jacobina, who is also a photographer) and I were involved with since we were in nappies. Helping with film and photography shoots, we got an amazing insight into the ins and outs of that industry. Seeing my dad at work is amazing, his technical abilities that come together with his incredibly good eye, is something I've always admired and will always be trying to understand.

My mother is an incredibly multi-talented artist; she taught me to paint, among other things like her eye for colour and storytelling. She isn't afraid to bring emotion into her work which I have really learnt from and is a massive part of my work now.

Then, also just the way my parents have expressed themselves through every aspect of daily life, through the way our house was styled and was forever changing, to the way they cook. That cemented for me the importance of creative expression and how it's such an important outlet for me. I could go on and on about what I have learnt from them and still, to this day, they are the first people I turn to to bounce ideas around with. They have taught me to have an open mind and to be ever-evolving.

"Hawke's Bay... influenced my environmental photography and I am interested in the incongruous nature of life here." — Brian Culy.



Above: *Damask* by Brian Culy.

Ashleigh: Are there other avenues that you wished to explore growing up (my dream job as a child was delivering papers on my bike) or has art always been what you imagined yourself doing?

Billie: Sounds very cliché but I vividly remember, at primary school, being asked to draw ourselves in our dream job. I drew myself as an artist holding a paint palette. I struggled at school academically and the only thing I was any good at and actually enjoyed was art, so I think I felt I had no other option. I do remember really wanting to be a vet but I can't handle blood...

Ashleigh: Brian, you have an extensive background in the film industry, having worked at the National Film Unit and Vidcom Auckland before founding your own film production company, Airdale. Did your passion for photography evolve out of an interest in cinematography or have you always felt that the two were inextricably combined?

Brian: For 15 years we worked in the industry's heyday, making TV commercials on film for the likes of Telecom, Westpac, National Bank, BP, Lotto; with a lot of artistic freedom. We were successful but it was a stressful industry, our kids were growing up, and I was missing out on that.

We decided to move to the Wairarapa to an isolated piece of land called Pounui Homestead,

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 — Harry Culy.



where we lived an alternative country life where the kids really appreciated nature and creativity. No TV. Bare feet, making stuff with nothing. We still did a few TVCs but in a much more pared-back way. Mainly Leanne and I working together without a large crew.

Ashleigh: Although you all work in various mediums, photography is something for which you've each become known. Has documentation always been important to your family? Are your albums full of the kind of uncanny, nostalgic imagery that is mirrored in your practices?

Billie: Hugely important. We have boxes and boxes of family photos, dad had a camera on him most of the time and being photographed was something so normal. Also stopping constantly, when out and about, to take photos was very normal. I think maybe subconsciously light and colour from old photos is mirrored in my work, nostalgia definitely comes up, and it is often an aim to make my work feel like it's from another time. Also, I think place is really important to me, and it is probably because each place we moved to or discovered was made to feel very important through documentation.

Brian: My wife is an artist and stylist, and has a company called Homebase Collections which has a few of my father's designs brought back to life. Every facet of our lives is and always has been approached creatively, environmentally and aesthetically. Our house, garden, what we eat, how we live, it comes naturally, it's part of who we are.

We've had a beautiful life which I've documented on film, always learning more about photography in the process. In fact, we have boxes of our life and, I have to say, that the film medium is to be treasured. We still look over our life as a family, touching each photo, sometimes laughing or crying. A photo shot on film is tactile and now, with digital, we don't have the same easily accessed archival system, it's harder to handle communally. Digital has its benefits and I like it but I'm also tormented by it.

Harry: I guess our family were pretty typical in terms of photo albums. I remember my mum made these little scrap books which she put in photos of us, our crappy drawings, and she would write down weird things we said. So maybe the albums were just documenting family life, being curious about our everyday world and taking the time to document it. I think all my work is rooted in my personal experience, so that autobiographical aspect has kind of remained constant, and also my love of books.

Ashleigh: Billie and Harry, although very different in terms of composition and subject matter, your works share similar tonal and stylistic qualities. Did you make a conscious decision to each pursue photography professionally, and if so did you engage in an active process of learning through collaboration?

Billie: I am not sure it was a conscious decision for me, and I still don't really consider myself a photographer sometimes. I think more about curating the image and collecting objects and colours I choose before I think about the camera, if that makes sense. I think that comes from combining all different influences growing up. I would like to collaborate more, as it's something I haven't done a lot, Harry has helped me in the past with scanning films etc which has been really cool, and involved me in a group show he put together. So I guess in subtle ways that's how we have connected.

Harry: I guess it was never a conscious decision, I became obsessed with photography (mostly through hanging out with friends, skating, looking at photo books/magazines) and it was this thing that I couldn't stop thinking about, so it happened organically. I saw these people taking photos of their world, it was a way of seeing the world through another's eyes that felt exciting.

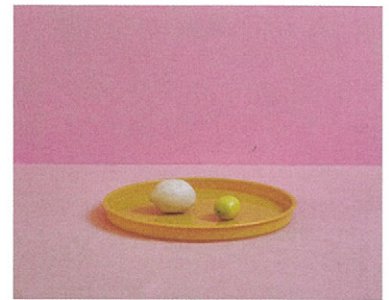
The photos I take are about trying to make sense of the world I live in. I moved back from the UK to study about 10 years ago, and studied

Above: *Lockdown 1* and *Lockdown 2* by Brian Culy.



Left: *Untitled*
(Alex and Tommy)
Wellington, New
Zealand by Harry
Culy, 2019.

Below: *Lemonade*
by Billie
Culy. Bottom:
Untitled (Devyn)
Wellington, New
Zealand by Harry
Culy, 2019.



"I still don't really consider myself a photographer sometimes. I think more about curating the image and collecting objects and colours I choose before I think about the camera." — Billie Culy.

at Massey University. I did an undergraduate degree, and this year finished my Masters. About five years ago, I started a small photo book publishing company — Bad News Books which was all about collaborating with artists to produce small-run photo books and that has really taught me a lot. I don't think that I'll ever stop learning about photography and art, just seeing the work my friends are making, finding new books at the library, going to galleries or even just looking at Instagram keeps me learning every day.

Ashleigh: As well as an interest in photography, Billie, I've read that you have experience in beekeeping — alongside painting, printmaking, and pottery. Could you tell me more about the connections between these, and how they play out in your crafting of each photographic image?

Billie: Not so much pottery, as much as I love to collect random bits of found pottery. But I have experimented with combining painting with my photos, I find my work blurs the lines of photography and painting, and I find often my work starts by painting backgrounds for texture and then layering things from there to photograph.

I did a stint of beekeeping years ago, I learnt the whole process which was incredibly valuable to have done. Now I look back, as you learn how delicate and complex our environment is, bees were an amazing way of learning intimately how destructive humans have been, for example, how pesticides have directly affected bee populations. I attempt to explore this in my work, the relationship between the natural environment and human impact.

Ashleigh: A couple of years ago, you also did a collaboration with Maggie Marilyn to raise money for Sweet Charity, an organisation that donates to the Grief Centre and Supporting Families in Mental Illness. Is it important to you to give back, and how was the process of seeing your images translate from being static to something that moves with the body, emblazoned on a t-shirt?



Billie: Very important to me and is something I should be doing more of. Art is an amazing way of expressing a story and something that can be super helpful. I enjoyed the experience because those objects in the image on the t-shirt were all things I had found at op shops, in particular the Hospice shop. So that really felt like a really nice fit. Seeing them printed on fabric was such a different experience and made me think printing on fabric could be another thing to explore.

Ashleigh: In 2013, Harry, you founded Bad News Books, a small and independently run publishing company based in Wellington (Aotearoa) with your partner Lucy Aitchison. What was the impetus behind the name, when did you come up with the idea and how has the journey so far been?

Harry: We started Bad News Books about five years ago now. I had all these friends making great little projects and I thought they should be out in the world — so we just started making these little photocopy zines called *Field Studies* and from there, it just grew kind of organically.

I wanted to make a not-for-profit publishing company. I had seen that there was a space for publishing work that might not fit into traditional publishing models. I had a really bad name for it then, one morning, I just woke up and the name was in my head and it had a good ring to it. It seemed to capture something about our DIY nature, and the fact we were outsiders maybe?

We have published around 30 different books from zines to full-colour hardback books, to newsprint publications, collaborated with artists from all over Australia and New Zealand. It's kind of grown beyond my abilities now, so as of 2021 I will be getting a board of friends behind it to help run it as we have just been winging it for so long.

Ashleigh: Harry, I really like your work that captures everyday New Zealand, what is it about New Zealand that inspires you and your work?

Harry: I lived overseas for quite a long time and coming back to Aotearoa gave me a new perspective. All the work I make has a personal connection to place in some way or another. For me, it's important to have a relationship to what you are photographing. I think New Zealand is a super interesting, weird, and beautiful place; Perhaps our distance from the rest of the world, perhaps our culture, perhaps the people that live here make it interesting for me.

When I was younger, I was always looking out to the rest of the world, then I realised that being from this place, I was just interested in showing our part of the world through photography. Although 'everyday' is different for everyone, I have always been interested in trying to look for the magic or strangeness that can be found in the ordinary world around me.

My most recent project, *Mirror City*, explores my relationship to place through looking at my hometown of Wellington, and a group of young people who live here.

Ashleigh: We've been fortunate in Aotearoa to have been in lockdown for a handful of months rather than most of the year. Nevertheless, it's still been an incredibly

difficult and uncertain time for many people. How have recent circumstances affected the way that you work? Did you go into lockdown together as a family?

Billie: I was in lockdown with my partner, as we decided to make the call to come back from London after moving over there. Obviously so lucky to be in New Zealand now, but it has been a confusing and really hard year. It has absolutely changed how I have been working, I have been making more work than I have in a long time.

I think I have channelled my nervous energy into art. I started making work for more therapeutic purposes, like making small sculptural works and taking a break from photography. So it's pretty crazy how big changes really come out through art. I don't think it's something I have ever really noticed before personally.

Brian: During lockdown, I searched for a project that was close to home. I went out on my bike with my camera and started examining some of the coastal settlements. I was really fascinated with a local campground with permanent residents, people that were maybe trying to escape or hide away from society or maybe couldn't afford another option. Understandably, I was often chased away and I'm not into intruding or breaching people's privacy. I'm quite a shy photographer.

Harry: I was in lockdown in my small flat in Wellington. It made me realise that you can still make work in your immediate environment, in fact, I'm more and more interested in trying to make pictures in my own small part of the world.

During lockdown I made some art with my sister Sallie (I made some hand-built ceramics which she drew pictures on). I'm excited to collaborate with her more in the future.

Ashleigh: Lastly, is there ever any family rivalry or banter at the Christmas table? And if so, how is this resolved? When I see my extended family, it's the usual back and forth but we always make up when someone offers to go up to the shops to buy everyone snacks.

Billie: Extremely lucky to be able to say there is nothing but support from my family, always great discussion around the table. If anything, we can all relate to each other's experiences because we all know that making art your career can be really tough. So it's pretty cool to have the support so close to home.

Harry: I don't think I've ever had Christmas day with Brian and Billie. We have these things called 'Culy Hoolies' with like potato salad and meringues around Christmas which are big family gatherings. I don't think there's any rivalry. Everyone's pretty supportive of each other's work — I always love to see new work by the family — we have several other artists and creative people (Ann Culy who is a brilliant jeweller, Tane Rogers is a talented illustrator, Marg Culy makes wonderful ceramics, my grandma Shirley was an amazing weaver, Billie's mum Leanne who paints and runs Homebase Collections, and Katie Melody is a stylist and creative genius) so it's nice to have other kinds of creative people around you but everyone's doing very different things really. ●





Above: *A State of Mind* by Billie Culy.

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